

THE BLUES

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE BLUES

By Greg Thomas

The secular musical form called the blues originated in the Delta at the turn of the 20th century, derived from shouts and field hollers of Southern blacks. The blues came to Harlem with the great migration of black Americans from the South after the death of Reconstruction, called by scholar Rayford Logan the “nadir” of black American history.

Harlem literary lights Ralph Ellison and Albert Murray described the blues as an ironic cultural response of heroism, a confrontation of the harsh reality and absurdity of life, yet nonetheless a humorous affirmation in the face of adversity through the incantation and percussion of improvisational art.

W.C. Handy was called “The Father of the Blues” because he codified and popularized the blues after hearing it played and sung by a Negro male guitarist with a slide in 1903. Among his famous compositions are “Harlem Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.” Handy resided in Harlem’s Striver’s Row during the last 15 years of his life.

Folk blues from down South transformed into the urban blues of the big city up North, and found its way into social and communal settings such as clubs, theaters and dance halls. Traditional blues is most often performed on guitar and harmonica. However, singing the blues, telling tales of woe to stomp the blue devils of despair, is its best connection to audiences in Harlem and throughout the world.

Few sang the blues better than Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith (known as the “Empress of the Blues”), Alberta Hunter, and Ethel Waters during the

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1920s. Smith was a big influence on gospel great Mahalia Jackson, while Waters was an early model for the first illustrious female jazz singer, Billie Holiday.

The blues is the foundation of most styles of American music; the father of jazz, Louis Armstrong, was a master of the blues, and the glorious improvisations of Charlie Parker, bebop jazz giant, were marinated in the blues of his native Kansas City. Duke Ellington and Count Basie Orchestras performed a highly refined version of the blues in Harlem dance and music clubs. Louis Jordan adapted the big band sound into “jump blues” which became the basis of R&B. All of the early stars of rock & roll had blues songs in their repertoires.

The blues also finds its way into the work of other artistic genres, forming, for example, a recurring theme in the work of Harlemite visual artist Romare Bearden. Langston Hughes had a blues touch in his poems and writings. The blues inspired his poem “The Weary Blues” (O Blues In a deep song voice with a melancholy tone, I heard that Negro sing, that old piano moan...).

The blues remains alive in Harlem today with its torch carriers Irene Reid and Jimmy “Preacher” Robins belting it out in Showman’s Café, the Lenox Lounge and Aaron Davis Hall.



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